

How do you write a research paper outline?

First things first, let us define what an outline is. An outline of anything helps you understand better how you are going to approach the topic, what steps you will take and how you will go about your work in general. In other words, it provides you an overview of your work in general. Writing papers for your university can be a daunting task requiring not only insight and knowledge in the field but also creativity and organization skills. Drafting an outline can help you predict the overall structure and flow of your paper, making sure your ideas are connected and flow naturally. Moreover, it gives you an opportunity to realize how much time your paper will take to write.

What is a research paper outline?

An outline is used to organize written ideas about a topic into a logical order. Outlines help us organize major topics, subtopics, and supporting details. Researchers benefit greatly from outlines while writing by addressing which topic to cover in what order. The most basic outline format consists on: introduction, a minimum of three topic paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Making an outline before you start writing your paper will not only help you organize your ideas and arguments but also help you present the topic with ease.

How many levels of organization does an outline have?

A research paper outline typically contains between two and four layers of organization. The first two layers are the most generalized. Each layer thereafter will contain the research you complete and presents more and more detailed information.

Why is it important that you have a good outline?

- Beat and avoid writer's block altogether! An outline will tell you what your next step is and as a result you will not be stuck once you are done with one thing. Even better an detailed outline can help you set goals to complete your current section thus eliminating the time required in-between to think up new ideas. You can finish your paper at one go since your ideas are already structured!
- Your outline will help you maintain structure and coherence in your paper. While researching you may come across information that you want to add and had not considered before while you should definitely include this in your work, including it in the writing place will result in your paper making no sense. It therefore advisable that you edit your outline as you go this sticking to it while still maintaining flexibility.
- Your outline will help you maintain your tack of research should you find yourself drifting into an unrelated area.
- An outline will help you organize multiple ideas and arguments simultaneously thus arriving at a sound analysis

- An outline not only helps you organize your thoughts, but it can also serve as a schedule for when certain aspects of your writing should be accomplished.

There are two general approaches you can take when writing an outline for your paper:

The topic outline: consists of short phrases. This approach is useful when you are dealing with a number of different issues that could be arranged in a variety of different ways in your paper.

The sentence outline: is done in full sentences. This approach is useful when your paper focuses on complex issues in detail.

Steps to Making the Outline

Before writing a research paper outline:

1. Select an appropriate topic. Before you can begin, it is absolutely crucial that you identify the research topic and the research problem. This is what your entire paper will revolve around so you should definitely know and understand what you are writing about. While you're at it to make things easier pick the title as well.
2. **State your Argument.** It is always wise to state your argument before starting your paper. This will help you keep in mind what aspect of the subject or topic you are arguing for or against and what your primary premise is. If you are conducting an experiment then definitely state your hypothesis and your reason for arriving at it so that you can easily prove or disprove it as and when necessary. Stating your hypothesis early on helps you add information and findings in a conducive fashion as your research progresses.
3. **Define the audience.** Make sure the language you use suits the audience of the paper.
4. **Conduct research.** There is no research paper without proper and thorough research. You will have to investigate a lot of resources in order to find effective evidence to support your argument. Firstly, you will have to find general information to support your thesis statement, then you will have to dig deeper. You will have to be aware of any counter arguments and evidence supporting them. This way you will master the topic and comprehend the pitfalls of your thesis statement better.
5. **Organize your headings and sub-headings.** Make a draft contents table if necessary.
6. **Jot down important points under your headings and sub-headings** so that you don't miss out any ideas you thought of while you are immersed in writing your paper.

7. When you write your paper or even make an outline **try to add in in-line citations** as you go and keep a record of them, either on MS-word or any citation website you are using. You can do this manually as well. This eases time and effort required in creating the bibliography.

What are the best tips for writing a paper outline?

- Consistency: ensure every heading has a similar tone.
- Organization: Move from generic to specific and not the other way round to avoid confusion.
- Support: have enough supporting information for each of your main ideas.
- Parallelism: be consistent with grammatical form
- Coordination: be aware of each point's weight
- Division: break information into sub-points

A Disorganized Outline Means a Disorganized Paper!

If, your paper, begins to diverge from your outline, this is very likely a sign that you've lost your focus. A good way to check your progress is to use what you have written to recreate the outline. This, makes it crucial that your outline is well planned.

What are your next steps?

- Keep a record of your references to avoid plagiarism. Ensure you follow your institution's guidelines.
- Your bibliography will begin on its own page at the end of your research paper.
- Title your research paper. Have a preliminary title to begin with, you can change it as you go.
- Begin writing your research paper draft.

- After the draft is complete, format it accordingly in MLA or APA or Chicago, as instructed. Beware that these formats are all slightly different from each other so make sure you know which format to follow.
- Write your final paper.

Hope this helps!